



WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM

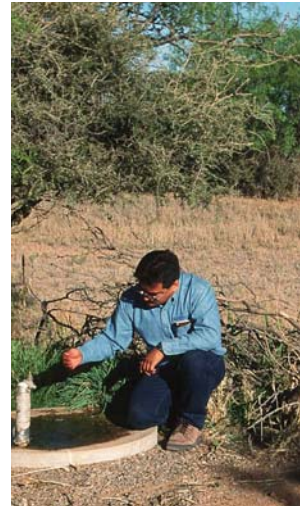
NEW MEXICO STATE PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

This state plan is to provide base information and request funding for the WILDLIFE HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM (WHIP) for New Mexico for FY 2004. The WHIP program is one of a suite of programs re-authorized by the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, (originally authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill), which expands environmental considerations and incentives for private landowners.

GENERAL

The diversity of wildlife habitat in New Mexico demands a wide variety of habitat improvement practices and management. New Mexico contains elevation changes ranging from 3000 feet above sea level to 12,100 feet, from Chihuahuan desert to tundra, from river bottom to mountain peaks. Most of the state is above 4,000 feet elevation. Approximately 50% is privately owned. Major habitats include the great plains on the eastern one-third, the Rocky Mountains on the western two-thirds with river valleys scattered through out and the southwest deserts.

Many landowners want to improve their land for wildlife only and may have no interest in livestock or farming. These landunits control many acres of rural land in the state and comprise a substantial workload for NRCS. The size of these varies from small areas (8 acres) to large areas (25,000 acres). There are also agriculture producers who desire to improve wildlife habitat on lands where agriculture is not the primary use.

NRCS STATE OBJECTIVES

1. ASSIST LANDOWNERS TO DEVELOP WILDLIFE AND FISH HABITAT.

The prairie ecosystem in eastern New Mexico is mostly private land. Restoration and management is needed for many species, such as: Lesser Prairie Chicken, Blacktailed Prairie Dog, Black-Footed Ferret, Sand Dune Lizard, Burrowing Owl, Mountain Plover, Swift Fox, Ferruginous Hawk, and others. It is part of the mixed grass/shrub community, which is emphasized in this program. Improvements in this ecosystem are desired to prevent the prairie chicken from being listed as threatened or endangered.

Sensitive species (footnote this page) have become perceived as an issue of liability on private property. Some landowners are afraid that having an endangered species on their property will limit options for management. Simultaneously, more and more habitat is lost and the ESA list of threatened and endangered wildlife grows longer. The modification or degradation of habitat is a primary reason for endangerment for most of the species listed under the ESA, even though habitat improvement is often feasible with just a little assistance. The New Mexico Prairie Dog Working Group has been active in developing a management plan since 1999.

Most of the riparian land is in private hands and is in need of improvement for the sake of water quality as well as wildlife habitat. The most desirable area to farm is in the flood plains of large river valleys where water is easily available and the soils are most productive. However, these areas are where the most damage is done during floods due to development and installation of structures within the floodplains.

Wildlife water sources are limited in the arid west. The encroachment of humans around water sources can be problematic for wildlife. In some areas, springs or other natural water sources are no longer available due to lowering of water tables or other human-related changes; and available water limits some species of wildlife. Many options are available to solve this problem, such as, wells, catchments, pipelines, spring developments, ponds. The placement of wildlife waters is a management tool that may be used to alter the distribution of wildlife within arid environments.

Although there are not many acres of wetlands in the state, each acre may be extremely important to wildlife.

New Mexico is one of the fastest growing states and is seeing new landowners move in who desire to maintain and improve the land for wildlife. Many are interested in educating children about ecosystems and wildlife. Several owners hope to receive assistance for riparian restoration, for native vegetation re-establishment, for wildlife water developments, bat houses and tree and shrub plantings, etc.

Backlogs of approximately 150 applicants statewide are awaiting WHIP funding.

Footnote: "Sensitive species are federal, state or tribal threatened, endangered or candidate species, or species being investigated for listing under the New Mexico Wildlife Conservation Act." (The NM WCA doesn't have a category of "candidate" species for species under investigation.

2. NRCS STATE WILDLIFE HABITAT PRIORITIES

These priorities (listed in order of priority) are found statewide and are not confined to any one geographic area.

MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE

This habitat type is found scattered statewide and in large blocks in eastern New Mexico. It is the home of the lesser prairie chicken, which is being investigated for federal and state listing, and is the object of concern by a five-state coalition of many entities. Several contracts have been funded for such items as grassland restoration, shrub seed mixes, removal of non-native species, water units, and fencing. The demand for improvements in this habitat type is great and cooperation with the lesser prairie chicken coalition and USF&WS and NMDG&F needs to be increased.

Private lands make up the majority of land ownership in the mixed grass prairie. Wildlife habitat improvement projects with the landowners and agencies will benefit from cooperative efforts under WHIP for many wildlife species as well as other sensitive species. Such as the Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Black-Footed Ferret, Sand Dune Lizard, Burrowing Owl, Mountain Plover, Swift Fox, Ferruginous Hawk, and others.

RIPARIAN HABITAT

Many, if not all, of New Mexico's riparian habitats, has been impacted (lost, altered or degraded) by man in some way. Most impacts have been negative for wildlife habitat.

Seventy percent of all wildlife in New Mexico use riparian zones at some time during their life. The importance of these areas in an arid state like New Mexico can not be overstated. Several of our sensitive species are dependent upon riparian habitat for their existence. Many riparian ecosystems are damaged and no longer function as complete systems. Much riparian habitat is fragmented, or its structure is simplified, the plant base is no longer reproducing, floods are more severe, bank water storage is nonexistent, exotics have taken over. The riparian vegetation is vital to the stability and health of the river channel, and riverine habitat.

Much work remains to be done. In some areas landowners are trying to improve watercourses and habitat. The time is right to offer help in this arena. The WHIP has joined FWS on several projects installing fencing, tree planting, removal of exotics such as salt cedar and Russian olive, replacement with native communities of cottonwoods and willows, wildlife water units, bat houses, pipelines, and seeding.

Sensitive species are listed for New Mexico in both federal and state sources on the Internet. Together they list over 60 species directly dependent upon riparian and aquatic habitats for their existence.

FOREST/SHRUB

Shrublands, Pinon-Juniper woodlands, and Ponderosa Pine Ecosystems are predominantly on private lands that have degraded habitat for many wildlife species. These provide many opportunities for WHIP. Habitat enhancements could include thinning small diameter trees, protecting old growth, prescribed burning, tree and shrub planting, and more.

In the western states there is a growing concern for mule deer populations. Many of the eleven western states are seeing declines in numbers of mule deer. This habitat type is distributed throughout the state and is the prime home of mule deer. Habitat needs here vary with some areas needing reductions in the abundance of juniper trees, while other areas will benefit from increases in browse. Permanent water is a consideration in some areas, and not in others.

WILDLIFE WATER SOURCES

In the arid Southwest, free water is vital and a key element to survival of many wildlife species and is not readily available in some areas. Upland water sources have been supplied by livestock interests for the most part, and are used heavily by livestock. Wildlife takes advantage of these when possible. However, many of these are degraded for wildlife use, or are in the wrong place, are seasonal at best, are turned off when cattle are not present or otherwise unsuitable for wildlife. Many areas simply lack free water for any animal. Our wildlife habitat evaluations in the field indicate water as a limiting factor in many cases. Contracts in FY 1998, 99, 00, 01, 02 and 03 provided permanent water sources for wildlife and this will continue in FY 2004.

WETLANDS

Creating new wetland areas comes under WHIP; (restoring old wetlands that were drained or farmed comes under the Wetland Reserve Program – WRP).

The Playa Lakes Joint Venture with FWS and others adds emphasis to the improvement of playa wetlands. This group is actively seeking projects, and is a perfect tie in with WHIP. The great number of playa wetlands in eastern New Mexico on private lands provides the opportunity for enhancements. There are several existing WHIP plans on playas and cienagas, many more are in need of assistance, and landowners are interested. Improvements of these habitats could benefit waterfowl, amphibians, aquatic invertebrates, shorebirds, and many other species. The Intermountain West Joint Venture wishes to become an interested partner in these efforts. Some practices to conserve playas include fencing, building nesting islands, and vegetation plantings.

SENSITIVE SPECIES HABITAT

The current federal list of endangered wildlife in New Mexico includes 54 species. The NM State List contains even more species (118). More important than these lists however, is the realization that if habitat improvements can be developed and maintained on a continuous basis, with foresight in habitat management, listing of additional species will be greatly avoided. Federal listing should be the last resort in the conservation of sensitive species. There is a great need for NRCS to assist private landowners, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and other state agencies in developing and maintaining habitats to avoid federal listings.

In most cases habitat loss is the reason for the decline of the species. Habitat loss results from many different causes and may be difficult to assess. When a recovery plan is completed a list of recommended actions is developed. These actions can be used by NRCS to assist

landowners to improve habitat and help in the recovery of the species. The life history work has already been done by other groups and agencies, and there is a need for assistance in getting improvements on the ground. NRCS can work with FWS and landowners to accomplish long term benefits using contracts through WHIP and Partners for Wildlife.

WHIP can play an important role in implementation of conservation strategies designed to prevent the listing of these sensitive species. Again, “getting ahead of the curve” in realizing a species is in decline and assisting in its habitat needs thru WHIP.

3. PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Several opportunities exist for partnership development or improvement. Some MOUs are already in place with organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Bat Conservation International, National Wild Turkey Federation, New Mexico Audubon and Ducks Unlimited. Many other organizations could be involved with partnering. Some of these are Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, American Bird Conservancy, Partners in Flight, Playa Lakes Joint Venture. NRCS in New Mexico is already working with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on various habitat projects. The Intermountain West Joint Venture provides funds for private land projects, on any kind of habitat. The Playa Lakes Joint Venture primarily fund playas and wetlands type projects.

Several Native American Tribes are cooperators of long standing and provide many resources for projects including funding studies and inventories, labor, consultants. Projects are in the initial stages of planning, which are eligible for WHIP and have the support of the Tribal Councils.

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has proactive programs throughout the gamut of wildlife habitat. We have cooperated on projects in the past and fully expect to do so again. WHIP ties in with their programs at several levels and areas. The Game and Fish Department and their sensitive species staff has also expressed interest in providing technical assistance in habitat planning and asked to provide plans to NRCS for this program. The Biota Information System of New Mexico can also be used to determine documented occurrences of special status species.

The response from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to cooperating on joint plans has been positive. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program will be useful as a matching source on riparian areas, endangered species habitats, and others. NRCS has worked with them on several projects in the last few years.

Bat Conservation International provides some services to individuals and specific projects on a limited basis. Trout Unlimited could be used for labor and some funds for stream improvement situations. Ducks Unlimited is active on a small scale and assists with planning wetland conservation. The New Mexico Audubon is knowledgeable and active on all bird species. The North American Wetland Conservation Act has a grants program for wetland improvements, which is available for cost share. The National Wild Turkey Federation is now active in NM and is soliciting working partnership with NRCS. The North American

Migratory Bird Treaty Act has cost share projects for upland habitats. The Mule Deer Foundation is also available to cooperate in projects.

4. APPLICATION / RANKING PROCESS

Application

- Form CCC-1200 (Formerly AD-1153 was used)
- At NRCS offices, USDA service Centers.
- Signed application is consent for NRCS to enter the property for planning.

NRCS Employees

- soils
- range sites
- map with GPS
- WHEGs (Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guide sheets) for project species. If no WHEG is available must call a Biologist.
- Must plan to supply limiting habitat needs for selected species on the property.
- Evaluate needs based on WHEG findings.
- Cost estimates and cost/acre.
- Conservation plan with habitat evaluations.
- Contract forms AD-1154 with Special Provisions attached.
- Contract Support Document with amounts and costs and cost shares outlined
- Complete ranking process (form)
- Submit to State Office (Program Manager) for state ranking.

5. MEASURING PROGRAM SUCCESS

- Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guides (WHEG):
 - before and at the close out of the Contract
- Photo points to compare to benchmark conditions, to be used with data from other methods.
- Frequency Transects as appropriate for ecosystem health determinations.
- Wildlife surveys as appropriate to determine change in use of habitat - wildlife counts, call counts, scat counts, track counts.

6. FUNDING REQUEST FOR NEW MEXICO

NRCS PORTION

Financial Assistance - 80%	= \$640,000
Technical Assistance - 20%	= \$160,000
TOTAL FUNDING REQUEST FROM WHIP	= \$800,000

7. PARTICIPANT RESOURCES

Resources provided by the partners involved in WHIP Program are as follows:

Landowners - FA \$ (25%), labor, equipment.

Indian tribes - FA \$ (25%), labor, equipment, consultants studies and inventories, materials, and technical planners,
Agencies - FA \$ (25 - 50%), technical planners.

MATCHING RESOURCES

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Landowners - In Kind = \$20,000.
NM Dept. G and F - Biologist planners = \$5,000.
FWS - Partners planning = \$ 30,000.
Playa Lakes Joint Venture - technical assistance = \$30,000
Intermountain Joint Venture – technical assistance = \$5,000
National Wild Turkey Federation – technical assistance = \$20,000
Mule Deer Foundation - = \$5,000
Lesser Prairie Chicken Group - technical assistance = \$30,000
TOTAL VALUE OF PARTNERS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE = \$145,000

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Landowners - 25% = \$ 160,000
FWS Partners Program = \$30,000
Playa Lakes Joint Venture = \$5,000
Intermountain Joint Venture = \$5,000
TOTAL VALUE OF PARTNERS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE = \$200,000

GRAND TOTAL - VALUE OF ALL SOURCES = \$1,145,000

8. ACCOMPLISHMENTS - to date with previous WHIP funding.

New Mexico has 118 active contracts on 100,000 acres. The average is 11 contracts per year with more or less \$11,000 per contract.

FY 1998 allocation - \$442,000
FY 1999 allocation - \$260,000
FY 2000 allocation - \$107,226 (includes a special allocation of \$75,000).
FY 2001 allocation - \$83,000
FY 2002 allocation - \$122,000
FY 2003 allocation - \$200,000

Three predominant practices have been water developments, upland wildlife habitat management and livestock exclusion fence.